

1 | Decadence, music and the map of European modernism

... nothing is more modern than this total sickness, this lateness and overexcitement of the nervous mechanism ...
Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner* (Leipzig, 1888)

Introduction

This book presents an analysis and interpretation of the role played by musical composition, aesthetics and criticism in Central and Eastern European decadence from the mid-nineteenth century to the immediate aftermath of the First World War.¹ Decadence is usually associated with themes of despair, deviance, decay, degeneration and death. Its artistic styles are characteristically described as excessive, epicurean, artificial, darkly comic or esoteric, and its structural strategies commonly understood as based upon processes of fragmentation, dissolution, deformation and ornamentation. The principal aim was a pessimistic critique of the bourgeois affirmation of subjective, psychological, physical and social progress and unity through the denigration of wholeness and wholesomeness and the celebration of the toxic and taboo. The energetics of the early riser were rejected in a turn to a protracted twilight of the idle. The work ethic and hopes of self-improvement were replaced by the provocative pose of the hedonist, the delights of *ennui* and lassitude, and the perverse pleasures of self-debasement. Decadence plays a complex, multifaceted role in the polemics and agendas of modernism. It is also notably ambiguous. Its spokesmen delighted in smokescreens. Its projects and purposes were altered according to regional and national context. These circumstances generated diverse cultural, aesthetic or political motives for either posing or creating as a decadent and for evoking or resisting the term as a descriptor of artistic style or content. The task ahead, therefore, is

¹ Reflecting the often cataclysmic events in politics and society during the 1920s and 1930s, the discourses of decadence which developed during interbellum Central and Eastern Europe are in many important ways radically different from those which form the focus of this book. Music's role in this discourse demands a separate study.

challenging, but as Henry Winthrop argues, the slippery pluralism of decadence is ‘both legitimate and desirable’; it liberates analysis from the restrictions of conservative censure and moralistic indictment.²

Art historians, cultural theorists and literary scholars have sustained full and fervent debates concerning the functions and characteristics of decadence in European modernism. By contrast, there is no book-length study devoted to defining and interpreting the styles, themes and forms of musical decadence. Furthermore, the role of decadence in Central and Eastern Europe remains rather less well explored than the French or British varieties, which often, of course, functioned as models or stimuli for artists working in Austria, the Czech lands, Germany, Hungary, Poland and Russia.³ The shift of decadent ideas back and forth across political and ideological boundaries generated striking new artistic developments. In the final years of the Habsburg, Prussian, and Tsarist Russian Empires, decadence acquired new and potent resonances which interacted, influenced and resisted each other in complex ways. For example, decadence assumed an important role in the repertory of ‘ethnosymbolisms’, to use Anthony D. Smith’s influential term,⁴ where the formation of national identities, histories and cultures evokes forces of decline and regeneration through moulding, institutionalizing and modernizing the image of the ‘ethnic’ under the impact of bourgeois discourses of language, race and physiognomy. This was typically manifest in a debate between decadence and a neoclassical revival of national mythologies and pagan primitivisms, one which raised the stakes invested in the regressive–progressive polarity. In this, and other ways, decadence played a critical role in artistic

² Henry Winthrop, ‘Variety of Meaning in the Concept of Decadence’, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 31 (1971), 510–26.

³ In the twenty-three chapters of his ‘Baedeker’ of decadence George C. Schoolfield devotes just four to these regions – one to Austria, one to Germany and two to ‘Poland/Prussia’ (to cover the movements of Stanisław Przybyszewski); Russia, in particular, is notably absent. See *A Baedeker of Decadence: Charting a Literary Fashion 1884–1927* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003). Erwin Koppen’s *Dekadenter Wagnerismus: Studien zur europäischen Literatur des Fin de Siecle* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1973) moves from Germany westwards – to France, England – and to the south – Italy – but not the east (though he also considers Przybyszewski as a ‘German’ decadent).

⁴ See Anthony D. Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation* (Oxford University Press, 1999) and ‘When is a Nation?’, *Geopolitics* 7 (2002) 5–32. Athena S. Leoussi discusses, among a range of examples illustrating Smith’s theory, the depictions of nostalgia, decline and rebirth in Alphonse Mucha’s *The Slav Epic* (1900–28), a Pan-Slavic, anti-Habsburg vision of ethnicity from origin through to apotheosis, and the allegorical, personified figures of the Polish nation in canvases by Jacek Malczewski: ‘The Ethno-Cultural Roots of National Art’, in Montserrat Guibernau and John Hutchinson (eds.), *History and National Destiny: Ethnosymbolism and its Critics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 143–59.

constructions of self-identity and national iconography and became central to the expression of modern social and political predicaments.

Jacques Barzun has put it simply: ‘all that is meant by Decadence is “falling off”’. But this does not imply a weakening of artistic creative vigour. Barzun continues:

It implies in those who live in such a time no loss of energy or talent or moral sense. On the contrary it is a very active term, full of deep concerns, but peculiarly restless, for it sees no clear lines of advance. The loss it faces is that of Possibility. The forms of art as of life seem exhausted, the stages of development have been run through. Institutions function painfully. Repetition and frustration are the intolerable result. Boredom and fatigue are great historical forces.⁵

Charles Baudelaire expressed similar sentiments when, in response to the critical use of the phrase ‘a literature of decadence!’ as a derogatory cry of warning, he declared:

In the changing splendours of this dying sun, some poetic minds will find new joys; they will discover dazzling colonnades, cascades of molten metal, a paradise of fire, a melancholy splendour, nostalgic raptures, all the magic of dreams, all the memories of opium. And the sunset will then appear to them as the marvellous allegory of a soul, imbued with life, going down beyond the horizon, with a magnificent wealth of thoughts and dreams.⁶

The sense of ‘falling off’ which Barzun identifies, with its subjective anxieties and sensational thrills, might be called cultural ‘vertigo’.⁷ Dizzying, disorientating and destabilizing, it has insecurities which are produced by the threat of precipitous or prolonged (or even endless) descent into a fetid underworld. Maurice Barrès, in his *Amori et dolori sacrum: La Mort de Venise* (1902), put it, with a symptomatic allusion to Wagner, thus: ‘Vertigo – the intoxication of high places and extreme emotions! At the height of the waves to which *Tristan* bears us let us recognise that pestilence which rises from the lagoons at night.’⁸ The inevitable complement to the rise of the new is the discomfiting displacement from the ‘natural’ ground of being. The modern ascends to high artifice. The loftier it becomes, the

⁵ Jacques Barzun, *From Dawn to Decadence: 500 years of Western Cultural Life, 1500 to the Present* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), xx.

⁶ Charles Baudelaire, ‘Further Notes on Edgar Poe’ [1853], in *Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, trans. P. E. Charvet (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 189.

⁷ On this metaphor see Philipp Blom, *The Vertigo Years: Change and Culture in the West, 1900–1914* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2008).

⁸ Maurice Barrès, *Amori et dolori sacrum: La Mort de Venise* [1902], trans. from Raymond Furness, *Wagner and Literature* (Manchester University Press, 1982), 49.

greater the sense of imminent decline and fall. From the highpoint the approaching sunset is sooner in view. Modernism's apparently upward progress leads towards a precarious, isolating predicament as its foundations are tested to breaking point. In spite of the achievements of modern bourgeois society, collapse into the abyss seems increasingly at hand. The sense of decadence is encapsulated by Mann's Thomas Buddenbrook, who at the height of his professional and personal development confessed that 'I feel older than I am ... When the house is finished, death comes. It doesn't need to be death. But the decline, the falling-off, the beginning of the end ... the signs and symbols of happiness and success only show themselves when the process of decline has set in.'⁹ Edifices of comfort and prestige crumble. The bourgeois romantic project disintegrates in the fall of the house of Utopia. Hopes of regenerative, renewing powers in a cyclic relationship of naïve immediacy and sentimental self-reflection, in a reactivation of innocent play in the face of potentially debilitating self-awareness, are also dashed in the irreconcilable alienation of humanity from all that seemed 'natural'.¹⁰ Nonetheless, the wounded spirit of romanticism might be perversely perpetuated, raised against realism and naturalism, and the outer world repulsed in the solipsistic, narcissistic turn inwards, with solace sought in shadowy simulacra. The elevated view is spurned; the curtains are drawn in to hide dark and private interiors.

Of course the sense of alienation from nature and pessimism about mankind's cultural progress are not exclusive to late nineteenth-century thought. Neither is the sense of decadence, which in part is an extreme manifestation of these feelings. But the artistic intensifications and transformations of these concerns as they became crucial in the case of Central and Eastern Europe at a time of political and social upheaval represent some of the period's most fascinating and often magnificent achievements. The restrictive use of the term 'decadence' to mainly French, or French-inspired, literature of the 1890s is myopic. A broader and more comprehensive view of decadence is one which sees the work of Joris-Karl Huysmans and his contemporaries as an extreme, influential or perhaps paradigmatic example of a topic which is of wide and profound importance in the second half of the nineteenth century and up to the First World War. Nietzsche emerges as a seminal figure. Decadence preoccupied him in the

⁹ Thomas Mann, *Buddenbrooks* [1902], trans. H. T. Lowe-Porter (London: Vintage Books, 1999), 352.

¹⁰ For discussion of these issues see Richard Sheppard, 'The Problematics of European Modernism', in Steve Giles (ed.), *Theorizing Modernism: Essays in Critical Theory* (London: Routledge, 1993), 1–51.

years before his final mental collapse. With Wagner, the French *décadence*, Christianity, and Greek and Roman antiquity as central stimuli he saw decadence as the major modern cultural malaise, but one which is not simply to be equated with, or defined by, decline. He threw out the traditional identifications of decadence with the collapse and excesses of the Roman Empire, as represented by Edward Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1788) and Thomas Couture's canvas *Les Romains de la décadence* (1847) – a construction of decadence often extended into images of Byzantium. He shifted decadence from abject marginality to ambivalent prominence in modernity. Decadence thus rises above the merely topical or fashionable.¹¹ Nietzsche's diagnosis was hugely influential. Music's role within these wider discourses of decadence, as compositional artefact, metaphor or inspiration, was often crucial.

Music and decadence

In recent decades much of the repertory which this book considers has attracted substantial analytical and theoretical interest. Writing in 1989, Christopher Lewis noted that analysis of a 'distinct musical style' which he calls 'post-romantic music' (Lewis identifies this as 'essentially post-*Tristan* music') has burgeoned with the development of new methods, particularly in harmonic analysis.¹² This analytical project gained further impetus in the neo-Riemannian enthusiasms of theorists from the mid-1990s.¹³ This development was contemporaneous with the heyday of the so-called 'new' musicology. *Pace* some important essays on Wagner's *Parsifal* and Strauss's *Salome* in particular, however, the hermeneutic and critical projects which emerged from this musicological climate tended to skirt the issue of decadence, or consider it too briefly or superficially. Although 'decadence' has been identified as 'a term that moved easily across disciplinary boundaries, settling in different contexts with distinct connotations and

¹¹ See Michael Silk, 'Nietzsche, Decadence, and the Greeks', *New Literary History* 35 (2005), 587–606.

¹² Christopher Lewis, 'Into the Foothills: New Directions in Nineteenth-Century Analysis', *Music Theory Spectrum* 11 (1989), 15–23.

¹³ See in particular the work of Richard Cohn: 'Introduction to Neo-Riemannian Theory: A Survey and an Historical Perspective', *Journal of Music Theory* 42 (1998), 167–80; 'Maximally Smooth Cycles, Hexatonic Systems, and the Analysis of Late Nineteenth-Century Triadic Progressions', *Music Analysis* 15 (1996), 9–40; and lately, with a more strongly hermeneutic element, 'Uncanny Resemblances: Tonal Significance in the Freudian Age', *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 57 (2004), 285–323.

effects',¹⁴ it has been little employed in any sustained way in interdisciplinary studies which are broadly centred on musicological methods and concerns. This is especially surprising, given music's prominent position in many of the seminal discussions of decadence from leading writers of the modernist period. Perhaps the neglect is to some degree related to questions of taste. Lewis quotes Charles Rosen's dictum that 'good taste is a barrier to our understanding and appreciation of the nineteenth century'.¹⁵ The issue becomes acute in some of the musical styles which flourished at the end of the nineteenth century, which may seem to flirt dangerously with hyper-emotionalism, excessive ornament or over-complexity. Something of this last quality is reflected in the jargon of theory, for example where rich functional 'multiplicity' in nineteenth-century harmony is described as leading to the 'functional extravagance' of Wagner's so-called 'Tristan chord'.¹⁶ If this is extravagance, then what happens to functionality and coherence in those pieces which take Wagner's *Tristan* and seek to pursue its chromaticism to further 'extremes'? The control, moral restraint, civility, and ideas of beauty and seamliness that were associated with what the self-appointed arbiters of cultural worthiness deemed to be 'good taste'¹⁷ were prime targets for decadents. Indicators of 'bad' or 'poor' taste – the mannered, kitsch, flamboyant, voluptuous, debased, debauched and indulgent – were flaunted and celebrated. Their audience's offence, where taken, was always intended. 'The intoxicating thing about bad taste', Baudelaire famously declared, 'is the aristocratic pleasure in giving offence'.¹⁸ Baudelaire provocatively proposed an 'unhealthy appetite' for the lascivious or obscene which 'threatens the assumption that "virtue is knowledge"'.¹⁹ This can challenge the strongest of palates.

There are other barriers to overcome. The problems which arise on attempting to relate music to prominent aspects of modernism in other

¹⁴ Liz Constable, Dennis Denisoff and Matthew Potolsky, 'Introduction', in Constable, Denisoff and Potolsky (eds.), *Perennial Decay: On the Aesthetics and Politics of Decadence* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 21.

¹⁵ Lewis, 'Into the Foothills', 23; Charles Rosen, 'New Sound of Liszt', *New York Review of Books* 29 (12 April 1984).

¹⁶ Charles J. Smith, 'The Functional Extravagance of Chromatic Chords', *Music Theory Spectrum* 8 (1986), 94–139.

¹⁷ See, for example, Daniel Cottom, 'Taste and the Civilized Imagination', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 39 (1981), 367–80; Marcia Cavell, 'Taste and the Moral Sense', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 34 (1975), 29–33.

¹⁸ Charles Baudelaire, 'Rockets', from 'Journals and Notebooks', in *My Heart Laid Bare and Other Prose Writings*, trans. Norman Cameron, ed. Peter Quennell (London: Soho Books, 1986), 167.

¹⁹ E. S. Burt, "'An Immoderate Taste for Truth": Censoring History in Baudelaire's "Les Bijoux"', *Diacritics* 27 (1997), 31.

artistic media (for example, symbolism, impressionism, *art nouveau*, *Jugendstil*, expressionism) have been widely attested. Carl Dahlhaus, for example, wrote of the ‘ineffable tie’ between works by Mahler, Schoenberg, Zemlinsky and Schreker and the art of *Jugendstil* and the Viennese Secession, but argued that ‘we cannot pinpoint it technically without doing interpretative injustice to these pieces’. Dahlhaus acknowledges that ‘connotations’ of decadence ‘have left their mark’ on the subject matter of several important works (for example, Debussy’s *Pelléas and Mélisande* or Strauss’s *Salome*) but dismisses these ‘marks’ as representing mere ‘details in the overall picture of the age’.²⁰ In this view decadence is limited to topical aspects of certain operas and is the reflection of a very limited aspect of the modern *Zeitgeist*. Decadence’s potential to play a major role in musical modernism is highly restricted. Indeed, for Dahlhaus, it is actually potentially misleading to attempt to identify ‘decadent’ aspects of musical style and structure. Other work by Dahlhaus, however, identifies characteristics of late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century musical structures and aesthetics which are strongly resonant of decadent styles and themes. In *Between Romanticism and Modernism* the topics he covers include the Nietzsche–Wagner polemic on the relationship of language and music, constructions of nationalism in music, techniques of ‘developing variation’, ‘endless melody’, ‘expanded’ or ‘wandering tonality’ and the ‘individualization of harmony’.²¹ All these subjects can be related to concepts central to decadence. They invoke the perceived modern decline and disunity of expressive media, the polarities of organic growth and decay, unity and fragment, esotericism and exotericism, the delights of ambiguity and harmonic ‘vagrancy’, the preoccupation with origins, genealogy, memory, inheritance, the heroic resistance to decline, and the search for a regenerative, primitive pastoral. Yet in this book Dahlhaus uses the term ‘decadent’ to describe only musical ‘kitsch’ – the anachronistic and empty pretensions of some of romanticism’s late ‘flowerings’ (note here the metaphor of evolutionary or biological over-ripeness).²² The association of decadence and kitsch needs unpacking. But Dahlhaus’s polemical use of the term ‘decadent’ is too restrictive and negative. It sustains its employment in music criticism to denote tasteless sentimentality, sensuality or stylistic indiscrimination, or simply as a word for outing

²⁰ Carl Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music*, trans J. Bradford Robinson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 334.

²¹ Carl Dahlhaus, *Between Romanticism and Modernism*, trans. Mary Whittall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

²² Dahlhaus, *Between Romanticism and Modernism*, 11–14.

the *outré*. It thus dismisses or ignores potential employments of the term to vitally useful and freshly illuminating musicological ends.

There are, however, examples in recent musicology where decadence's significant role in modernism is recognized. A fruitful discussion of music and decadence has emerged in recent interpretations of Tchaikovsky's *The Queen of Spades* (1890) by Simon Morrison and Boris Gasparov. For Morrison the opera 'addresses the decline of Imperial Russia, the sense – prevalent in the symbolist movement – that the nation was undergoing a transition'. He notes how the work exemplifies the *fin-de-siècle* move to the modern, expressed in musical allusions to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century pasts. Morrison concludes that Tchaikovsky was 'the only composer at the time to give voice to the growing sense of unease in Russian society', a feature which assured his posthumous status among the symbolists as prophet of their world view.²³ For Gasparov the opera is a 'quintessentially Petersburgian tale' containing 'symbolist and expressionist traits'. But Gasparov's description of St Petersburg as the 'symbolist city', as the site of an existence overburdened with allusions and memories,²⁴ where the 'inner world of a person is dissolved into mutually incompatible images, postures, actions, each provoked by ubiquitous precedents ...', also intimates a world of decadence. This decadent element is further suggested when he describes Hermann, the main character, as a 'sum of ... incoherent parts', a person who 'turned out to be a "man without qualities", a disoriented neurotic self incapable of comprehending how and for what purpose he ended up in the place in which he finds himself'. For Gasparov, Tchaikovsky's transformation of Hermann 'reflects the perceived malaise of the *fin de siècle*'. In the opera's 'dizzying' stylistic shifts of 'chronotypes' Hermann becomes 'lost in time': through a 'maze of temporal mirrors' he appears as 'eighteenth-century seducer, an early nineteenth-century Byronic figure, a Tristanesque character for whom love means death ... a Dostoevskian killer with an obsessive idea, or a Chekhovian man of the age

²³ Simon Morrison, *Russian Opera and the Symbolist Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 'Introduction', 14; 'Chaikovsky and Decadence', 45–114. Decadence is also an important aspect of Alexandra Wilson's *The Puccini Problem: Opera, Nationalism and Modernity* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), particularly in her discussion of *Madama Butterfly* and the 'superficial', 97–124; see also Byron Adams, 'Elgar's Later Oratorios: Roman Catholicism, Decadence and the Wagnerian Dialectic of Shame and Grace', in Daniel M. Grimley and Julian Rushton (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Elgar* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 81–105.

²⁴ Morrison notes how 'signs of decadence, the social malaise that presaged the tumults of the modern era', appear in those works by Gogol and Pushkin which 'portray St. Petersburg as being suspended between natural and supernatural worlds, but also between the recent and distant past': *Russian Opera*, 46.

of twilight afflicted by a deep spiritual malaise'. If, as Gasparov concludes, the opera is 'an overture to the symbolist drama of an imperial city on the road to its collapse' then it is equally the prelude to decadence. The result is 'self-annihilating symbiosis that betrays the decadent world of incoherent obsessions and perpetual disturbances'.²⁵ Once this pessimistic, 'proto-decadent' tone is recognized in Tchaikovsky's music, its attractiveness as a model for Karłowicz and Rachmaninov (discussed in Chapter 2) becomes more clearly understood.

Morrison's and Gasparov's insights relate music to cultural and historical discourses. In neither is there any sustained musical analysis. In his magisterial history of Western music, Richard Taruskin offers a short discussion of musical decadence which includes observations of harmonic and formal aspects in music by Richard Strauss and Arnold Schoenberg. As an example of 'mild and pretty' musical decadence he analyses Strauss's early piano piece 'Rêverie', Op.9 No.4, from *Stimmungsbilder* (1882–4). The piece's topic, a musical image of a 'mood' produced by a dream, is one typical of high romanticism. Taruskin locates a decadent tone in the musical preoccupation with an 'oscillation' between the tonic chord and a chord of 'chromatic neighbours' which according to harmonic theory is unclassifiable (Example 1.1). This play with the unnameable is, according to Taruskin, 'endlessly repeated until it sounds "normal"'. But this is not quite right. Taruskin's focus on the unusual chromatic detail is apposite: the chord is returned to rather obsessively (fetishistically perhaps), and by the final section it is certainly normalized. But the piece is not 'endless'. It is constructed as a series of sentence forms, with a strongly closural final phrase in which the opening gesture returns one last time to act as a frame for the *Stimmungsbild*. Thus, in its formal clarity, convention and simplicity the piece seems remote from what one might expect of a musical example of decadence. Taruskin provides no discussion of what decadent musical form might involve, but does offer a striking image to illustrate the kind of 'perverse' pleasures that decadent forms might provide. He asks us to imagine a 'child at play with an "erector set"':

For a while, if intelligent and interested, or at least well-behaved, the child will follow the instruction book and connect the pieces "structurally", producing the expected buildings and bridges. Later, however, in order to maintain interest, the child might start connecting the pieces with one another in ways the instruction book does not prescribe, creating wierd shapes that have no practical application,

²⁵ Boris Gasparov, *Five Operas and a Symphony: Word and Music in Russian Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 133–4, 142–4, 158, 160.

Example 1.1 Richard Strauss, ‘Rêverie’, *Stimmungsbilder*, Op.9 No.4, bars 1–4

Andantino

dolce

sempre p

m.d.

m.g.

una corda

*Red. * Red. * Red. * Red.*

Example 1.2 Arnold Schoenberg, ‘Erwartung’ (Dehmel), Op.2 No.1, bars 1–2

Sehr langsam (♩)

Aus dem meer - grü-nen Tei - che ne-ben der ro - ten Vil - la

p

but give pleasure (to the maker, at least). Really curious children might even stick the pieces in places their mothers might not care to hear about.²⁶

Childish wilfulness, boredom and perverse pleasures in deformation – all might describe the psychological state and motivations of Salome. Indeed, Strauss’s famous operatic treatment of this character seems an obvious place to look for decadent forms. (Chapter 4 will explore how, in response to one of Oscar Wilde’s most overtly decadent poetic lines, Strauss sets up the ‘normal’ dynamics and shape of the bar form only to dissolve, distort and deform them by decadent play on the harmonic characteristics of chromatic neighbour chords.) Taruskin’s second example of ‘mild and pretty’ decadence is Schoenberg’s setting of Richard Dehmel’s ‘Erwartung’, Op.2 No.1 (1899). The similarities between the opening of this song (Example 1.2), introducing the ‘sea-green pond beside the red villa’ in which is seen the

²⁶ Richard Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music*, vol.IV: *Early Twentieth Century* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 31–3, 36.